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languages

JUSTICE & HOME AFFAIRS

A safe and humane external border: Europe can manage

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By Maria João Rodrigues



Among the measures that the EU must take in order to tackle the refugee crisis is ensuring that refugee camps in countries of origin provide adequate living conditions.

[Freedom House/Flickr]

On the eve of the crucial European Council summit, Maria João Rodrigues asks whether Turkey should be asked to control Europe's external border and whether there are no other solutions that are more decent, cheaper and more reliable.

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A real common response to the refugee crisis is possible if European leaders regain the will to act together, instead of trying to pass on the 'hot potato'. Europe can create a strong external border that ensures security while at the same time respecting human rights. Our continent does have enough financial resources, technology and willing people to make it happen. The question is, as usual, why can't the EU organise itself?

Thousands of asylum seekers have died in recent years while trying to reach Italian or Greek islands. Germany and a few other countries have taken a welcoming attitude, but as the numbers of asylum seekers keep rising, leaders fear that an open-door policy is not sustainable. This week's EU summit will be asked to decide on a plan to return to Turkey all those who attempt an irregular crossing into Greece. In return, EU countries would bring in a limited numbers of Syrians straight from Turkey.

This plan could finally uproot the human smuggling business, which no country has achieved so far. But it raises many questions: Is it ok to send people back to Turkey, which is not a safe third country under the Geneva Convention? Do we effectively stop accepting asylum applications from Iraqis and other non-Syrians? How high will Turkey drive up the price, once it is given Europe's keys? Won't new routes open up again, elsewhere?

Turkey is an important partner, but also an increasingly authoritarian country, suppressing political opposition and freedom of speech. However, since no transit country in Europe is willing to host many asylum seekers, EU leaders would like to 'outsource the problem'.

Europe's first priority should of course be to consolidate the cease-fire in Syria, strengthen the peace process and create safe zones where reconstruction can start and refugees can return. The same must be attempted in all countries from which people are fleeing. But as long as we are not able to prevent violence, poverty and environmental disasters in the whole Middle East and Africa, we need to establish a proper EU policy for border control and asylum.

All countries wishing to participate in the Schengen space without internal border controls should make their fair contribution to such a European policy.

This European solution should be based on three main priorities:

- **Outside Europe:** Stronger aid to asylum seekers' countries of origin and transit, ensuring liveable conditions in existing refugee camps. Direct resettlement of asylum seekers from third countries across Europe, through safe and legal routes, based on an agreed formula. Strengthening European consulates and liaison offices abroad.

- **A European external border system**, managing people's flows: not a barbed-wire wall or naval fortress, but a set of advanced infrastructure preserving an area of free mobility and providing useful public services, including registration, identification and support for direct resettlement. The border system should have adequate capacity to provide security and crack down on smugglers but also ensure necessary humanitarian assistance.

- **Inside Europe:** Well-managed and decent reception of asylum seekers. Stronger capacity of asylum authorities. Training and socio-economic integration of people authorised to stay. Upholding European social norms for everyone, including minimum wages and availability of education and healthcare.

All this would cost money, but money spent on a European policy, with European objectives, under European control. For now, only small steps are being taken. But the EU budget can and should be strengthened during the upcoming mid-term review, finally providing for a proper border and asylum policy that has been lacking since Schengen was launched.

Will European leaders take their responsibility for the European border, or will they just hand over the keys and hope that Turkey delivers what they did not manage?